

. . . and Justice for All Legal Literacy for Women

In Jordan, Morocco, and Syria, the law exempts a man from punishment if he kills a female relative after discovering her committing adultery. Under a customary law that still holds in parts of Albania and Kosovo, a woman raped in front of her own family may be expected to commit suicide and bring the family shame to an end. In Uganda, Cameroon, and many other African countries, customary inheritance practices persist that deny women their right to inherit land and other property—this despite statutory laws providing at least limited protection of women's rights to inherit. And as recently as August 1999, the Senate in Pakistan failed to condemn the practice of "honor killings," when a male family member kills a woman who is suspected of premarital relations or who refuses an arranged marriage.

All over the world, women must combat rights abuses that emanate from legal systems, culture, and customs.

Two strategic objectives in the Beijing Platform for Action, finalized after the 1995 U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women, focus specifically on the law and women's rights. The first is to "ensure equality and non-discrimination under the law and in practice." The second is to "achieve legal literacy." To fulfill these objectives, women must understand local laws and international human rights conventions. Armed with this understanding, they can change legal systems by advocating for the fair application of laws and by influencing legislation.

Legal literacy is a critical strategy in helping women recognize and advocate for their rights. The goals of legal literacy are to help women recognize how law is relevant to their lives, to help them understand the strengths and weaknesses of laws, and to teach them how to use the law as an instrument for social change (see box on page 3). Once women understand they are entitled to rights, they cease being victims and learn to seek redress.

Effective legal literacy projects can follow a variety of different strategies to pursue these goals. Some projects organize women within their local communities to facilitate awareness-raising seminars. Others train laypeople to be community-based organizers. These efforts serve both to educate women individually and to

mobilize groups that can press for legal reforms. But without support from the society at large, women's groups alone are unlikely to propel reform movements to success. One key way to win public support is by engaging the interest of local media. Lastly, public officials—those who make and enforce the laws—should be a part of all legal literacy efforts.

Beyond achieving the easily quantifiable results of numbers of workshops held or people trained, legal literacy projects more importantly cultivate a new way of thinking by and about women and their status in society.

Organizing Women in Their Communities

Most legal literacy programs target women whose human rights are either neglected or violated. Community workshops are among the most effective methods of providing this education.

Working with USAID support, a Croatian NGO, for example, organized workshops in Yugoslav successor states to introduce women to those human rights recognized by international conventions. The workshops also demystified legal systems and helped women understand the ways their basic human rights were routinely violated. Many women acquired new knowledge of their country's legal system. Using this knowledge, they resolved to protect their rights by putting housing contracts in

their own names as a safeguard against gender-biased inheritance laws, by demanding contracts at work, and by reporting violence against women.

These workshops also prepared women to organize for legal reform. Participants learned how to build coalitions and how to network as human rights advocates. Women from various organizations crossed ethnic and geographic boundaries to join together and share what they knew about networking and coalition building. By bringing these women together, the workshops fostered reconciliation among groups that had been warring only a few years earlier. Hostilities borne of ethnic and geographic differences were superseded by women's deter-

mination to combat shared human rights violations.

In a legal literacy project in the Philippines, women attended seminars to learn about the electoral process, how to organize election campaigns, and effective methods of advocating for legislation addressing women's issues. Women who had been unaware of their collective power to influence politics became skillful advocates. In one initiative, over 400 women organized to take action against wife beating, rape, and other forms of violence against women. Project participants also introduced legislation to benefit women. This included gender sensitivity training for local officials, a legal rights awareness program for women, and health care services for older women.

In addition, women's direct political participation increased. More than 200 women who received advocacy training ran in local and municipal elections. Of these, a remarkable 47 percent won. What makes this even more remarkable is 40 percent of those elected were running for the first time.

Training Community-Based Organizers

Community-based organizers can both educate women about their human rights and serve as women's rights advocates. These activists work within their own cultures and often are more likely than outside professionals to be accepted by their neighbors. By training local women to be legal literacy advocates, projects cultivate

Four USAID Legal Literacy Projects

Creating Opportunities in the Yugoslav Successor States

The fall of Communism in Eastern Europe resulted in the deterioration of previously established and accepted rights for women. Be active, Be emancipated (B.a.B.e.), an NGO in Croatia, is using legal literacy to help re-establish these rights in the Yugoslav successor states. B.a.B.e.'s Women's Human Rights Network for Education and Action Project, begun in 1996, used workshops and follow-up activities to educate women about their rights. It also built networks of women working on human rights issues. Typical rights violations in this war-torn region include ethnic discrimination against refugee women, the eviction of women from their homes, rape and other forms of violence, and economic discrimination.

Advocating for Rights through Legislation in the Philippines

In 1996, the Center for Legislative Development in the Philippines set up the Legislative Advocacy for Women's Rights Project in Cotabato. The project has focused on increasing women's political participation to develop and implement laws that support women's rights. Its legislative advocacy goals are to encourage women to introduce favorable policies, prevent disadvantageous ones from being passed, and become more active in elections and local government. The Center for Legislative Development chose Cotabato because women and minorities there are more alienated from government structures than they are in other areas of the country.

Bangladesh: Influencing and Changing Traditional Community Structures

Ain O Shalish Kendra, a Bangladeshi NGO, has been implementing the Gender and Social Justice Project since 1995. This project works within the traditional village *shalish* (a local system for dispute resolution) to raise awareness about women's rights in the community. The *shalish*, composed of a council of elders and opinion leaders, is the most common recourse for resolution of disputes affecting women. Ain O Shalish Kendra also has established legal assistance committees made up of local community leaders to analyze *shalish* decisions affecting women's rights.

Cambodia: Using the Arts to Challenge Violence

In 1998, The Asia Foundation supported two local groups—the Project Against Domestic Violence and the Women's Media Center—in implementing the street theater project. Using street theater as a medium, this project provides information about domestic violence to men and women in rural areas of Cambodia, where the problem is severe. It is targeted to rural populations, community organizations, and government officials.

a sustainable base of skilled, motivated community leaders.

This was one achievement of USAID's legal literacy project in Croatia. Many workshop participants were inspired to start their own activities. Some women wanted to start a legal hotline, others were eager to lobby for a change in national laws, and still others were prepared to start new nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In the former Yugoslav countries, more and more activists are using the concept of women's human rights and advocacy to promote social change.

In a very different example in Bangladesh, neighborhood conflicts are traditionally resolved through the *shalish*, a local system for dispute resolution where village elders arbitrate complaints and settle disagreements. A USAID Office of Women in Development (WID) project working in Bangladeshi villages trained school teachers, local officials, and other

influential members of the community to monitor *shalish* decisions affecting women. The purpose of this oversight is to ensure that fair and appropriate procedures are used. The project also is training women to be *shalish* mediators.

Using the Power of the Press

When legislative change is required, the media can play a pivotal role in gaining public support for specific issues. Understanding the media's potential to support women's awareness-raising efforts about human rights, the Croatian NGO offered media workshops and training by working journalists. Women gained basic knowledge about the media and learned not to be intimidated by media professionals. In addition, other local NGOs have initiated a campaign to raise public awareness of negative portrayals of women in the media.



The Asia Foundation

In Cambodia, a tense situation is portrayed by actors in the street theater project.

A project designed to raise awareness and provide information about domestic violence in Cambodia used street theater as a way to reach women and men in rural areas. The theater productions generated their own positive media attention. During the performance tour, the number of articles in the press about women's issues—particularly domestic violence—escalated. This media attention is generating dialogue on domestic violence—a topic rarely discussed before.

Engaging Public Officials and Professionals

Effective legal literacy programs engage key members of the legal system—lawyers, judges, police, politicians, and other public officials. In Bangladesh, the WID-supported project has prepared local officials to be fair *shalish* monitors through training in women's rights and gender issues. Since the project started in 1995, legal rights training has been conducted in 39 unions for local government and civil society leaders. In the Philippines, as part

The Three Components of Legal Literacy*

Knowledge: Acquiring Awareness about Rights and the Law

Legal literacy generally begins as an awareness-raising exercise among grassroots women, lawyers, and activists working on gender issues. An important first step is to demystify the law by making technical legal information and services understandable and accessible.

Understanding Content and Context of Laws

Legal literacy extends beyond awareness of laws. A more complex understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of both the laws themselves and their application in society is a vital component. For example, women may come to understand that laws are inherently biased or that redress through legislation will be fruitless if the courts apply the law discriminatorily or if women and society in general misunderstand women's rights.

Action: The Capacity to Mobilize for Change

Building on their knowledge and understanding of the law, women can then use the law as a political resource and work toward changing laws to effect social change within the family and the larger community.

*Adapted from Marge Schuler and Sakuntala Kadirgamar-Rajasingham in *Legal Literacy: A Tool for Women's Empowerment*.

of the overall effort to facilitate women's increased involvement in politics, a program was offered to help local elected officials understand gender issues.

The street theater project in Cambodia was designed to sensitize both public officials and local audiences. Before each performance, local NGO staff met with government officials and community organizations to provide information on relevant laws and appropriate responses to domestic violence, and to inform them of available resources. Printed materials were distributed during each performance, providing information on laws, a list of referral agencies, and other NGOs working with victims of violence. Performances reached an average audience of 9,600 people and a total estimated audience of over 340,000 in five provinces.

The Larger Impact

Legal literacy is an educational process, where people learn about the importance and relevance of women's rights in their society. It also involves showing women that they can and should advocate for their rights. Once women learn to assess the meaning of rights, assert these rights, and take action for positive change, they become key players in creating a stronger and more equitable society.

For More Information

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The Philippines: The Center for Legislative Development, Legislative Advocacy for Women's Rights Project: International Center for Research on Women: (202) 797-0007. E-mail: icrw@igc.apc.org. To e-mail

the Center for Legislative Development directly: rclcd@info.com.ph

Bangladesh and Cambodia: Ain O Shalish Kendra's Gender and Social Justice Project and the Project Against Domestic Violence/ Women's Media Center's Theater Project in Cambodia: The Asia Foundation: (202) 588-9420. E-mail: gwip@dc.asiafound.org

Resources for Human Rights Education at the Community Level

"Women Hold Up the Sky" is a series of eight short films and training videos. It is designed to teach women about the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, to show the convention's relevance to women's daily lives, and to stimulate discussion on women's rights. It is available free to organizations and communities in developing countries and comes with a trainer's manual. Contact: The People's Decade of Human Rights Education, 526 West 111th St., Suite 4E, New York, NY 10025, USA. E-mail: pdhre@igc.org. With English, French, and Spanish subtitles.